

# NEWS AND NOTES FOR FLORIDA VETERANS

Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office  
St. Petersburg, FL

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The "News and Notes for Florida Veterans" is published monthly by the Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida, to provide information on VA benefit programs to veterans and dependents in Florida. The material presented does not have the effect of laws or regulations. Please send questions or comments on this newsletter to Veterans Service Center, ATTN: "News and Notes," PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. We do not have the resources to maintain a mailing list for distribution to individuals; however this newsletter is available on the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office web site at [www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete](http://www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete).

## **VA TO LOOK AT THREE SARASOTA CEMETERY SITES**

(VA News Release January 28, 2005) WASHINGTON-- Three properties in Sarasota County, Fla., will be evaluated over the next year by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) before it chooses one as the site of a future national cemetery. VA announced the locations today along with a \$100,000 contract for an environmental assessment of the sites. Two sites are located on Fruitville Rd., east of I-75; the third is on State Road 72, east of I-75. All have many favorable characteristics for cemetery development, said Robert B. Holbrook, director of construction for VA's national cemetery system. The properties have access to good roads, are near the center of the area's veteran population east of the city of Sarasota, were cleared either for farming or cattle grazing and have minimal wetlands or other impediments to development. Each of the three sites has 400 acres, which is what VA needs for the cemetery. More than 400,000 veterans live within 75 miles of the three sites.

Developing a national cemetery is a multi-year process, Mr. Holbrook explained, that begins with visits to potential sites. He, his staff and Florida Department of Veterans Affairs representatives visited 24 sites in five counties -- Manatee, Highlands, Desoto and Charlotte, in addition to Sarasota County. The environmental assessment follows visits to an unprecedented number of potential sites that were offered for sale to the government, said Mr. Holbrook. He added, "It represented an extremely patriotic gesture on the part of all property owners."

The planned assessment of the three sites will determine the impact of a new cemetery on the environment and examine the physical factors that could affect the feasibility of a cemetery's operation, factors such as endangered species or archaeological remains. The firm MACTEC Engineering, of Sterling, Va., was awarded the contract to perform the assessment. After the environmental assessment is completed and a preferred site selected, if funding is available in 2006, VA will conduct surveys, appraisals and title review on the top site and purchase it. Later steps will include master planning, design and construction. VA expects a cemetery to be partially constructed and open for burials by 2009.

## **REALIGNMENT OF JURISDICTION FOR EDUCATION**

**CLAIMS** Jurisdiction for VA education claims from Tennessee is being transferred from the Atlanta Regional Processing Office (RPO) to the St. Louis RPO to better balance workload across the Regional Processing Offices. Performance improvements in claims processing timeliness and blocked and abandon call rates are expected in the Atlanta RPO, which handles education claims from Florida, as a result of this workload realignment.

The effort to transfer jurisdiction is currently in the planning stages. A detailed realignment schedule will be developed in the near future. The actual transfer of claims processing activities will be completed during the third quarter of this fiscal year. Historically, enrollments have been low during that time of the year, which should allow the transfer to be implemented with minimal impact on performance.

## **ADMINISTRATION SEEKS \$70.8 BILLION FOR VA IN**

**2006** (VA News Release February 7, 2005) WASHINGTON -- Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson announced today that President Bush will seek a record \$70.8 billion in the fiscal year 2006 budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), with the overwhelming majority of these resources targeted for health care and disability compensation. The FY '06 budget proposal calls for \$33.4 billion in discretionary funding -- mostly for health care -- and \$37.4 billion in mandatory funding, mostly for compensation, pension and other benefit programs. This represents an increase of 2.7 percent over this year's discretionary budget.

## **FY '06 Budget Highlights for the Veterans Health**

**Administration** The Veterans Health Administration has received record budget increases over the last four years. With this budget proposal, the President, working in partnership with Congress, will have increased health care funding for veterans by more than 47 percent since FY '01. The President's FY '06 budget proposal requests \$30.7 billion for VA's health care program. With these resources, VA will be able to treat more than 5.2 million patients. In 2006, nearly 80 percent of veteran patients are expected to be high priority -- those veterans who count on VA the most.

The President's budget request also includes \$750 million to continue the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) program designed to modernize VA's health care system. The FY '06 proposal brings the total department investment to date to \$2.15 billion. This historic transformation means that VA will be able to provide greater access to high-quality care closer to where most veterans live.

#### **FY '06 Budget Highlights for the Veterans Benefits Administration**

The President's budget proposal for FY '06 will enable the Veterans Benefits Administration to maintain record increases in educational assistance and home loan programs. Continuing the nation's long-standing commitment to provide educational benefits to veterans, service members and certain family members of veterans, the department will continue to offer veterans and service members educational assistance up to \$1,004 per month for full-time education or training in an approved institution.

VA's support to service members and veterans purchasing or improving homes through the home loan guaranty program will remain at record levels. VA is now guarantying home loans with no down payment of nearly \$360,000 for eligible veterans, up from the \$240,000 maximum last year.

Vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits for service-disabled veterans will increase by \$64 million in FY '06, which is 11 percent more than FY '05.

Men and women still on active duty will find it easier to access VA benefits when they near the end of their military service because of the enhancements in the FY '06 budget proposal for VA programs that allow early application for disability claims and other benefits.

#### **FY '06 Budget Highlights for the National Cemetery Administration**

Over the past four years, the President has committed to the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. To this end, the FY '06 budget calls for \$290 million, nearly \$17 million, or 6.4 percent, more than the level for FY '05. The FY '06 budget proposal calls for \$90 million for construction projects, including funds for the purchase of land for six new national cemeteries in the areas of Bakersfield, Calif.; Birmingham, Ala.; Columbia-Greenville, S.C.; **Jacksonville, Fla.**; **Sarasota, Fla.**; and southeastern Pennsylvania. The share of veterans living within 75 miles of a national or state veterans cemetery will increase to more than 82 percent in 2006, which means that about 1.7 million more veterans will have access to a burial option in 2006 than in 2004.

#### **IMPORTANT DATES IN MARCH**

**March 1** deadline for returning Eligibility Verification Reports.

**March 1** payments for February due

**March 10** last day to input change of address or establish direct deposit on compensation and pension awards in time for the 04-01-2005 payments.

**March 23** last day to change or cancel direct deposit on compensation and pension awards in time for the 04-01-2005 payments.

#### **VA FACILITIES ADDRESSES AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS:**

**VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg** - PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731 **1-800-827-1000**

**Regional Processing Office, Atlanta, GA** (education claims) - PO Box 100022, Decatur, GA 30031-7022  
**1-888-GIBILL1 (442-4551)**  
Telephone number for Chapter 30 self-verifications  
**1-877-823-2378**

**Veterans Health Administration Toll-Free Hotline** (medical care) - **1-877-222-8387**

**VA EFT Information Hotline** (electronic funds transfer - direct deposit) **1-877-838-2778**

**VA Insurance Center, Philadelphia** (VA Insurance) - PO Box 42954, Philadelphia, PA 19101 **1-800-669-8477**

**VA Health Administration Center** (CHAMPVA and Spina Bifida health care) -  
CHAMPVA inquiries: PO Box 65023, Denver, CO 80206-5023  
CHAMPVA claims: PO Box 65024, Denver, CO 80206-5024  
Spina Bifida inquiries and claims: PO Box 65025, Denver, CO 80206-5025 **1-800-733-8387**

**Foreign Medical Program Office** (medical treatment abroad) -  
PO Box 65021, Denver, CO 80206-5021 **303-331-7590**

**National Cemeteries**  
10,000 Bay Pines Blvd N, Bay Pines FL **727-398-9426**  
6502 SW 102nd Ave, Bushnell FL 33513 **352-793-7740**  
Naval Air Station, Pensacola FL **850-453-4108/4846**

**National Cemetery Administration Office of Memorial Programs** (headstones and markers) - 810 Vermont Ave NW, Washington, DC 20420 **1-800-697-6947**

**Loan Guaranty Eligibility Center** (certificates of eligibility)  
PO Box 20729, Winston-Salem, NC 27120  
**1-888-244-6711**

**Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) Unit** -  
Chicago VA Regional Office **1-800-829-4833**

#### **INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST:**

VA Web Site: **[www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)**

VA Web Automated Reference Materials System (WARMS)  
**<http://www.warms.vba.va.gov/>**

Property Management **[www.ocwen.com](http://www.ocwen.com)**

Florida Department of Veterans Affairs:  
**[www.floridavets.org/](http://www.floridavets.org/)**

St. Pete Regional Office: **[www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete](http://www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete)**

